

## Sūrah ‘Aşr

### Central Theme, Relationship with Preceding Sūrah and Sequence in the Subject Matter

In Sūrah Takāthur, the previous *sūrah*, those people are warned who waste all their lives in planning to amass wealth until death stares them in their eyes and they do not even get the time to think of the higher objective for which the Almighty blessed them with life. Instead of trying to achieve this objective, they wasted their lives in going after petty goals and trivial desires. Had they known that one day like all other favours, they would have to give an account of the way they spent the great blessing of life also, they would never have been so foolish as to waste their lives in gathering meagre pleasures and becoming worthy of eternal condemnation. Had they exercised prudence, they would have realized that this life could have afforded them with an everlasting kingdom. Now, in this *sūrah*, the real value and importance of life is divulged. The factors which make it a surety for eternal salvation and the factors which make it responsible for eternal doom are explained. How a person can make it an embodiment of benevolence for himself and how it becomes, out of its own accord, a means of his scourge and punishment if he is not able to make it an embodiment of benevolence for himself is alluded to.

In order to make man understand this reality, an oath has been sworn by time as a means to testify to this reality: if a person reflects, he will come to know that the real investment he has in this world is a small span of time which is given to him in the form of a period of life. If he uses this time in the right manner, he can become a favourite of the Being Who blessed him with life and also attain the state whereby he becomes pleased with His Creator, and His Creator become pleased with Him. On the other hand, he can also earn the eternal punishment of Hell by misusing it. In other words, by nature, this time period is like a sword which can be used in both ways: if a person does not use it to his own advantage, it will automatically be used in favour of Satan, his eternal enemy. A very small portion of time – the present – is in his power and he can use it the way he wants to; of the rest, either it has become the past which can never return to him or the future which is hidden to him and no one knows its extent or whether it exists for him in the first place and if it

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does what are the circumstances and the demands it affords. Whatever time comes, it comes with its certain demands and requisites. There is no possibility that a person defer his present obligation to the future.

After focusing man's attention to this all important reality, the correct approach is pointed out which is adopted by those who correctly benefit from the time of life they are given and thereby earn eternal life in place of this fleeting one. Though this approach is pointed out in a few words, however such is the judiciousness and comprehensiveness of style adopted that if a person deliberates on it, he will come to know the individual and collective obligations which are imposed on him that he must discharge and that it is on discharging them that his eternal salvation depends.

A little deliberation shows that the real purpose of the Qur'ān is to guide man to this straight path and to organize the individual and collective life of a person in order to achieve success in the Hereafter. In other words, the message which is conveyed by one hundred and fourteen *sūrahs* of the Qur'ān has been succinctly put in three verses of this *sūrah*. It is to this very fact that Imām Shāfi'ī has pointed by saying that if people only read Sūrah 'Aṣr while reflecting on its contents, it will suffice for them.

### Text and Translation

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ  
وَالْعَصْرِ (١) إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَفِي خُسْرٍ (٢) إِلَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَتَوَاصَوْا  
بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ (٣)

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Ever Merciful.

Time bears witness that man is in a state of loss except those who embraced faith and did righteous deeds and urged one another to the truth and urged one another to patience. (1-3)

### Explanation

وَالْعَصْرِ (١)<sup>1</sup>

The particle *و* denotes “bearing witness” and *عَصْر* means “a period of time”. Here is a summary of what my mentor Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī has written while presenting his research on this word in the exegesis of this *sūrah*:<sup>2</sup>

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2. Farāhī, *Majmū'ah Tafāsīr*, 339.

عَصْرَ means “ a period of time”. Just as the word ذَهْرَ refers to the totality of time, the word عَصْرَ refers to its moving forward and swiftness. Consequently, its dominant use is on the time period which has passed. Imru' al-Qays says:<sup>3</sup>

وهل ينعمن من كان في العصر الخالي

(And now it is good fortune for those who were in the time of the past.)

'Ubayd ibn al-Abraṣ says:<sup>4</sup>

فذاك عصر وقد أراني

يحملني بازل شبوب

(And that was also a period of time when I used to see myself riding a young and beautiful she-camel.)

After presenting the meaning of this word in the light of classical Arabic, Imām Farāhī summarizes the discussion thus:<sup>5</sup>

It is evident [from this discussion] that the word عَصْرَ on the one hand reminds a person of the incidents and events of the past and on the other hand also directs his attention to their specific characteristic of swiftness and rapidity. A reference to both these facets brings two consequences before us. First, the judgement of God will be implemented on people according to their deeds. Second, we should benefit as much as we can from the passing time whose most prominent feature is its briskness and speed.

Now consider the question that why has time been sworn upon here? The answer to this question is that on the one hand the Almighty has directed our attention to the various events of history which took place

3. Ṣadr al-Dīn 'Alī ibn al-Ḥasan al-Baṣṭī, *Diwān al-ḥmāsah al-Baṣṭīyah*, vol. 1 (Beirut: 'Ālim al-kitāb, 1403 AH), 48.

أبو زيد القرشي، دار النشر: دار الأرقم - بيروت

4. Abū Zayd al-Qarshī, *Jamhurah ash'ār al-'arab*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-arqam, n.d.), 141. This source cites the second hemistich as: تحملني نهدة سرحوب. (Translator)

5. Farāhī, *Majmū'ah Tafāsīr*, 340.

on the basis of His law of reward and punishment and which have been mentioned in the Qur'ān and other divine scriptures and on the other hand people have been cautioned and prodded that they should not spend their lives in indifference and oblivion; they should diligently try to use it to their own advantage. It is in lieu of these fast moving moments of time that they can obtain an eternal kingdom if they really comprehend their true value. If they do not, then they should remember that they will become a means of eternal curse for them.

Imām Farāhī has explained this point in the following words in his exegesis:<sup>6</sup>

The judgement of God enforced on the previous nations [of the Prophets] was an exact recompense of their deeds. If they did virtuous deeds, the Almighty blessed them with ascendancy and if they took to oppression and spreading disorder, the law of God after giving them respite for a time in which the truth was made evident to them to the extent that they could not deny it, destroyed them. It is to remind people of this reality that an oath was sworn by time so that people remember that one day they will also have to face this law of retribution.

Moreover, there is another delicate point hidden in this oath: the real investment a person has is that of time and the primary feature of time is that nothing can outdo its briskness and speed. How naïve is a person who in spite of being aware of this disloyalty of time trusts it and becomes indifferent to the transience of this world and to the accountability of the Hereafter.

Imām Farāhī cites an example to explain this reality:<sup>7</sup>

In this matter, man is much like a merchant who trades in ice; however, instead of trying to sell it as soon as possible and gain some profit from this transaction, he stacks it in a place and merrily views its shine relishing the coldness it provides. It is obvious that very soon such a short-sighted merchant would end up lamenting his indifference.

In this regard, Imām Farāhī has directed our attention to another aspect:

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6. Ibid., 341-342.

7. Ibid., 342.

Moreover, in the swiftness of time, there is an aspect which gives us glad tidings and strengthens our patience: in this short span of time, man, if he desires, can gather an everlasting treasure. An accursed person being lured by the transient pleasure of this mortal life deprives himself of eternal pleasure and success; however, a wise person, after bearing the trials of self-discipline and virtue of this finite life which is no more than a fleeting dream and a flash of lightning ... obtains the pleasure of God and the embellishment of His eternal love.

إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَفِي خُسْرٍ (٢) إِلَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَتَوَّصُوا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَّصُوا  
بِالصَّبْرِ (٣)<sup>8</sup>

Stated here is the real premise to substantiate which an oath has been sworn by time. If, on the one hand, the value and importance of the life-span granted to a person is such that he can attain an eternal kingdom because of it and also end up eternally condemned if he shows indifference, and, on the other hand, such is the nature of its swiftness and speed that every moment is shortening it and man has no hold on this, then all people are in a state of loss – people whose real investment and capital is being rapidly consumed whilst they themselves are unaware of this happening. Thus this whole premise is stated in the form of a testimony and asserted that all people are in a state of loss except those who embraced faith and did good deeds.

It is evident from this discussion that the real value and significance of life is in faith and righteous deeds. The very purpose for which the Almighty has blessed man with life is that man, in defiance and in opposition to Satan, leads it in a manner prescribed by God; in reward for this, the Almighty will be pleased with him and he will be pleased with the Almighty and earn the ticket to eternal Paradise. Just as the reward for the eternal life of Paradise in return for a few days of trial is no ordinary a favour, ending up losing this favour whilst being led astray by the lures of Satan is no ordinary a deprivation.

The definition of *imān* has been mentioned at a number of places in this exegesis. In short, it can be stated as acknowledging God with full sincerity of heart whilst accepting all His attributes and their obvious corollaries. Imām Farāhī, whilst explaining the meaning of *imān* in his exegesis, has written:<sup>9</sup>

8. Man is in a state of loss except those who embraced faith and did righteous deeds and urged one another to the truth and urged one another to patience.

9. Ibid., 347.

The root of *imān* is *amn*. It is used in various shades of meaning. *وَأَمَّنَهُمْ مِنْ خَوْفٍ* (He gave him peace). The Qur'ān says: *وَأَمَّنَهُمْ مِنْ خَوْفٍ : صَدَقَهُ وَاعْتَمَدَ (106:4)*. (He provided them with peace in fear, (106:4)). *أَمَّنَ لَهُ عَلَيْهِ* (He attested to it; He trusted it). *أَمَّنَ بِهِ : أَيْقَنَ بِهِ* (He had absolute faith in him).

This word has been used in the Qur'ān in all these shades. One of its derivatives is *مُؤْمِنٌ* (*mu'min*), which is amongst the noble names of God because He gives peace to those who seek His refuge.

This word is also an ancient religious term. ... Hence the certitude which exists with humility, trust and all the conditions and corollaries of adherence to a view is called *imān* and he who professes faith in God, in His signs and in His directives and submits himself to Him and is pleased with all His decisions is a *mu'min*.

After faith (*imān*), the status of righteous deeds is that of its corollary. When true faith is engendered in a person, just as its radiance lights up his inner-self, it should also necessarily light up the deeds which emanate from him. If, accordingly, good deeds do not result from faith, it only means that faith has not taken firm roots in his heart. It is essential that there exist harmony and concord between faith and deeds. Imām Farāhī has explained this aspect in his *tafsīr* in the following manner:<sup>10</sup>

Righteous deeds are mentioned in the Qur'ān right after faith in the capacity of an explanation ... Similar is the case of the mention of obedience to the Prophet (sws) after a mention of obedience to God ... The need for this explanation arises because certain important aspects of certain words remain concealed. In the case of faith, the need for its explanation is obvious: the place of faith is the heart and the intellect. In matters of intellect and heart, not only can a person deceive others but also at times he himself can remain in deception. He considers himself to be a *mu'min* (believer) whereas actually he is not. For this reason, two testimonies needed to be required for it: a person's words and a person's deeds. Since words can be untrue, hence a person who only professes faith through words is not regarded as a *mu'min* and it was deemed essential that a person's deeds also testify to his faith.<sup>11</sup> Thus the Qur'ān said:

10. Ibid., 349.

11. It should remain in consideration that the faith under discussion is

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا آمِنُوا (١٣٦:٤)

O you who believe with the tongue! Believe through your deeds.  
(4:136)

Whilst explaining the reason for regarding good deeds to be *ṣālihāt* (righteous), Imām Farāhī writes:<sup>12</sup>

God has regarded good deeds to be *ṣālihāt* (righteous). This word actually alludes to a great piece of wisdom: the means for the apparent and hidden, worldly and religious, individual and collective, corporeal and intellectual development and advancement of a person are righteous deeds. In other words, righteous deeds are deeds which are a means of providing life and progress to a person and through which a person can reach the highest rungs of development which are innately found in his nature.

Later, he has further explained this point thus:<sup>13</sup>

This point can be understood in other words from the fact that man is part of the overall machine of this universe. Thus only those of his deeds will be regarded as righteous (*ṣālih*) which are in harmony with the scheme and wisdom of God which He has adopted for this collective system. The Almighty has not made this world a play-place for children. There is a certain system of prudence which runs through this whole universe and it is the will of the Almighty that whatever happens in this universe should be in harmony with this system of prudence.

Consider next, the words: *وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ*. What is mentioned in the previous part of the verse primarily relates to the personal life of a person; however, a person does not merely have a personal life: by his very nature, he has a gregarious temperament; he is always a part of a

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actually its essence. Faith in its legal connotation is not what is discussed here. Those who want to understand faith in its legal sense should look up various places in this commentary where it has been alluded to. Imām Farāhī has referred to some of its important aspects in his commentary on Sūrah 'Aṣr and we have also attempted to explain some of its important features in this commentary.

12. Farāhī, *Majmū'ah Tafāsīr*, 2nd ed. (Lahore: Faran Foundation, 1998), 352.

13. *Ibid.*, 353.

family and member of a society. If he has adopted some other life-style, it is not because of his natural temperament and instinct; on the contrary, it is because of some unnatural deviation. His relationship with family and society is natural. Just as he receives support from these in his material life, he receives guidance from them for his moral and spiritual development. It is because of this assistance provided by family and society that an obligation is imposed on him that he should not remain indifferent to their welfare and well-being. If he does, it would be against decency. It is the requirement of human nature that people who become aware of the straight path that leads to faith and righteous deeds should also urge others to tread this path and also urge each other to adhere to perseverance and patience. This is because without adhering to perseverance and patience it is neither easy to adopt the truth and remain steadfast on it nor is it easy to call people towards the truth.

It should be kept in consideration that it has not been said that they call people towards faith and righteous deeds; on the contrary, it is said that they urge each other to adopt *ḥaqq* and urge each other to show patience. This style has not only included in it what is found in the first part, it has also made very important additions to it: *imān* is included to the utmost in *al-ḥaqq* because it is the right of God and the greatest right of God. Similarly, righteous deeds either relate to the rights towards God or rights towards human beings; hence righteous deeds are also included in *ḥaqq*.

It is evident from this discussion that believers do all these things as an obligation, urge others to adopt them and also counsel others that discharging these obligations is no easy a task; it requires patience and forbearance. Those who do not have this characteristic will find it very difficult to carry out these obligations.

The word *ḥaqq* has been explained by Imām Farāhī in his exegesis in the following words:<sup>14</sup>

The word *ḥaqq* is used primarily for what exists and continues to exist. However, it has different usages. Its usage in at least three meanings is very common and conventional in Arabic:

- i. something which is certain
- ii. something which is acknowledged to be true by intellect.
- iii. something which is a moral obligation

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14. Ibid., 354.



After citing various arguments from the Qur'ān in favour of these three meanings, Imām Farāhī writes:<sup>15</sup>

As far as its special meaning ie showing sympathy to the weak and poor is concerned, it has sprung from its general meaning. It is as if this is the greatest *ḥaqq* to the people of Arabia which is incumbent upon every person who has the capacity to do it. It should be the right of every needy person ... For this very reason *iḥsān* is regarded to be a *ma'rūf*, which means something which is recognized and acknowledged by every person and has the status of an accepted law before all reasonable people. It is evident from this discussion that if the word *ḥaqq* is taken to mean "sympathy with the poor", it will reflect all the meanings of the word mentioned above.

Whilst presenting his research on the word *ṣabr*, Imām Farāhī writes:<sup>16</sup>

However, one should realize that to the Arabs patience is not something of the sort of weakness and frailty which is the characteristic of the helpless and the feeble; in fact, to them it is the foundation of tenacity and resolve. This word has been amply used in classical Arabic poetry and in all these usages, it corroborates this view of the Arabs. Ḥātim Ṭā'ī says:<sup>17</sup>

و غمرة موت ليس فيها هوادة  
يكون الصدور المشرفي جسورها  
  
صبرنا له في نهكها و مصابها  
بأسيافنا حتى يبوخ سعيها

(Against many horrible seas of death and life over which there were bridges of swords, we showed perseverance with our swords against all their calamities until their heat went away.)

After citing the couplets of some famous classical poets, Imām Farāhī has explained the meaning of *ṣabr* through the Qur'ān itself in the

15. Ibid., 354-355.

16. Ibid., 345.

17. Ḥātim Ṭā'ī, *Diwān*, vol. 1, 39. The source actually cites *صبرنا له* as *صبرنا لها*. (Translator)

following words:<sup>18</sup>

The Qur'ān itself has revealed the real meaning of *ṣabr*:

وَالصَّابِرِينَ فِي الْبَأْسَاءِ وَالضَّرَّاءِ وَحِينَ الْبَأْسِ (٢: ١٧٧)

And who are patient in adversity, illness and in times of war (2:177)

This verse mentions three situations to display *ṣabr*: adversity, illness and war. A little deliberation would show that these three are the fountainheads of hardships and difficulties. If a person remains steadfast in them, then he is a person blessed with the quality of patience.

Whilst further explaining the mutual relationship between *ḥaqq* and *ṣabr*, Imām Farāhī writes:<sup>19</sup>

A summary of all these details is that *ḥaqq* opens the door to all virtues and *ṣabr* closes the door to all evils. In other words, it can be said that *ḥaqq* is what is really wanted and fondly desired and *ṣabr* is the enthusiasm and passion to achieve it.

It is not concealed from the eyes of the discerning that the real thing is steadfastness once a virtue is attained. One should now reflect how aptly and comprehensively all virtues and good deeds are combined in the two words of *ḥaqq* and *ṣabr* and how deep and vast is the relationship between the two.

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Here, in fact, many branches sprout from a root. *Imān* is like a foundation and a nucleus. Righteous deeds are mentioned after it as its explanation. Since *ḥaqq* is cherished and liked by both the mind and the heart and on it depends perfection and excellence of both, *ṣabr* is mentioned as a consequence for its love. To love and cherish something requires that a person possess the qualities of perseverance and steadfastness for it. It is very obvious that this perseverance and steadfastness is as per the status of what is loved and cherished. The more love and cherished a thing is, the more the enthusiasm and vigour for it would boil in person. The manifestation of the feelings of defence, anger and sense of honour is not the same

18. Farāhī, *Majmū'ah tafāsīr*, 346.

19. *Ibid.*, 355-356.

for all things; it varies: the more a thing is liked and loved, the more do the feelings of respect and honour arise for it.

The reason for the Almighty's anger and fury is also because He holds *ḥaqq* dear; so those who damage it in anyway invite His rage and wrath. Can a person silently bear the insult of something which is dear to him? His sense of honour will definitely incite him to defend it. A mother loves her child and one knows that this love is not mere love; it also possesses a frenzied sense of honour and when the time comes this honour even sacrifices a mother in defense of her child. It is this sense of honour and protection which is found in nations for their rights and demands. So much so, a feeble dove also has such intense feelings of love and honour for her eggs and offspring that if someone tries to snatch them, she will always try to ward him off through her frail feathers. It is evident from this discussion that *ṣabr* in fact originates from one's love for *ḥaqq*.

Let us now see what the relationship of "faith and righteous deeds" and "urging one another towards *ḥaqq* and *ṣabr*". Imām Farāhī writes in this regard:<sup>20</sup>

It is evident from the last part of this third verse: *وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ* that these people have in them the qualities of *ḥaqq* and *ṣabr* and besides practically adhering to them, they also call others towards them. This aspect is found in between the lines and has not been expressed in words. The reason for this is that it firstly was already found in the words *آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ* and secondly the lack of efficacy of a person who does not practice what he preaches is so obvious that at this instance in the verse where believers are praised for their qualities one cannot even imagine that they would urge others' to something which they themselves do not practically adhere to.

It is evident from this discussion that just as righteous deeds have sprung from faith, mutual exhortation towards *ḥaqq* and *ṣabr* have sprung from righteous deeds. A person who cherishes and likes *ḥaqq* would always be ready to bear difficulties and hardships for its protection. It is essential that for it, his knowledge, love and sense of honour increase. He would not want that merely he himself love *ḥaqq*; he would also want the whole world to have the same feelings

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20. Ibid., 357.

for it and wherever he sees *ḥaqq* in subservience and facing oppression and evil in a dominant position, he would become anxious and like a person having dignity and determination would motivate others to defend and protect *ḥaqq*. Motivating and inspiring others for this purpose is a natural corollary and part of the sense of dignity and honour for *ḥaqq* found within himself. Thus, here the Almighty has mentioned urging others towards *ḥaqq* and *ṣabr* as actually a part and an explanation of righteous deeds.

With the grace of God, with these line the explanation of the *sūrah* comes to an end. فالحمد لله أولاً وآخراً (All gratitude, from the beginning to the end, is for God).

Lahore,  
24<sup>th</sup> April, 1980 AD  
9<sup>th</sup> Jamādī al-Thānī, 1400 AH

(Translated from *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān* by Shehzad Saleem)

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